MINUTES

South Fork Holston River IP

2nd Stakeholder Meeting

April 26, 2023; 9:00-10:30am (Residential/Urban); 10:30-noon (Agriculture)

DEQ Southwest Regional Office, Abingdon, VA

ATTENDEES:

- Brittany Phillips, Wildlife Biologist, USDA Forest Service- Mt Rogers National Rec Area
- Hunter Wyatt, Conservation Specialist, Holston River SWCD (HRSWCD)
- Jeana Waddle, District Manager, Evergreen SWCD (ESWCD)
- Katy Treash, Environmental Health Supervisor, Virginia Department of Health (VDH)
- Lorie Stevens, Administrative Secretary, Holston River SWCD (HRSWCD)
- Michael Bussiere, USDA Forest Service- Mt Rogers National Rec Area
- Mike Horne, Conservation Specialist, Evergreen SWCD (ESWCD)
- Travis Holt, Environmental Manager, Virginia Department of Health (VDH)
- Wayne Turley Conservation Specialist, Holston River SWCD (HRSWCD)
- Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ)
    - Ashely Went- Central Office, Technical Reviewer
    - Kaitlin King- Northern Office, NPS Coordinator
    - Kim Romero- Blue Ridge Office, NPS Coordinator
    - Kristy Woodall- Central Office, TMDL/NPS Data Coordinator
    - Melissa Secor- Central Office, NPS Project Coordinator
    - Stephanie Kreps – Southwest Region, NPS Coordinator

Meeting purpose: To get feedback on the proposed Best Management Practices (BMPs), costs, timeline and priority areas of the South Fork Holston River Watershed to address bacteria loads entering the watershed; and discuss next steps.

Each participant introduced themselves. Stephanie Kreps (DEQ) gave a brief introduction of the meeting purpose, gave an overview of Virginia's water quality process and the South Fork Holston River's TMDL (approved in 2016) (see PowerPoint presentation). The first part of the discussion focused on residential/urban issues and then the agricultural issues were discussed in the second half of the meeting. The meeting wrapped up with next steps to complete the plan. Details of the discussions are below, with reference to the slide in the PowerPoint.

Residential Septic/Urban:

Slide 6: The number of unsewered houses has been updated to only include the Virginia portion of the SF Holston watershed. The 2010 census was used in the TMDL to determine the total number of unsewered houses. It was also said in the first stakeholder meeting that the number of straight pipes seemed too high so the total number of straight pipes in the watershed has been reduced 1%. Even though Laurel Creek- Elliot Branch has zero estimated unsewered houses, 319(h) funding could be used here if there are failing systems to address.

Slide 7:

- The proposed **80% residential septic replacements and 20% repairs is reasonable**.

- The proposed **60% conventional systems and 40% alternative systems is reasonable**.
- The assumption that **50% of the repairs would not require a permit is reasonable**.
- The proposed **third of households with failing septic systems that would be interested in doing a pumpout is reasonable**.
- The **extent of proposed BMPs seem reasonable** (especially since these numbers are divided up between Stage 1 and Stage 2, where Stage 1 will be enough to reach the Delist Goal).

Slide 8: The residential septic BMP costs are based on the DEQ BMP Cost-Share rates for failing residential septic systems. There will be a need for DEQ to revisit these costs over time to make sure increased costs are accounted for in future 319(h) applications.

Slide 9: For implementation, it's only necessary to achieve Stage 1 BMPs because this will get us to the Delisting Goal of the TMDL. Since the bacteria water quality standard changed since the TMDL was completed (2016), the new standard will be met by just focusing on Stage 1. By completing Stage 2, this will reach the TMDL goal. The **50% of BMPs in Stage 1 and 50% of BMPs in Stage 2 are reasonable**. It was decided that **15 years would be adequate to complete Stage 1 and 5 years for Stage 2**.

Slide 10: In the last meeting, it was mentioned to focus in the Damascus/Sugar Grove areas first but to get at water quality improvements sooner, the map shows the priority areas where bacteria load will be addressed the quickest/first (because these are the areas where the bacteria loads are contributing the most and we'd like to get at these areas first in order to get 'quick wins' for water quality). Even though Damascus/Sugar Grove are mostly sewered, the **group still thinks that these areas should be the initial focus to help with spreading the word**. It was explained that a future 319(h) application could **focus on the Damascus/Sugar Grove areas for education/outreach but that actual implementation would be best in the areas of higher priority to be efficient with funding/resources**.

Slide 11: **Number of pet waste BMPs seem reasonable,** even though it will probably be more than 3 stations that could be installed, especially if multiple areas along the Virginia Creeper Trail are implemented (the big question will be, who will maintain them). **One pet waste education program is reasonable.**

Slide 12: **Pet waste costs are reasonable** (using current 319(h) BMP costs).

Slide 13: Prefer to match the same timeline as residential septic BMPs (**15 years Stage 1, 5 years Stage 2**). **50% for Stage 1 and 50% for Stage 2 are reasonable**.

Slide 14: The SWCDs pointed out that zero fencing installed to date for SF Holston River-Dickey Creek (HUC which includes Sugar Grove) seems incorrect. There has been exclusion fencing installed and Mike Horne of Evergreen SWCD said he was aware that some of the BMPs weren't showing up correctly in the DCR BMP Warehouse. **He said he'd look into it and let us know how we need to revise the total. The USFS said they'd also provide their data on total stream exclusion fencing and water systems.** It was clarified that NRCS numbers are not included in these totals (since we're unable to get these numbers).

The **50% of BMPs in Stage 1 and 50% of BMPs in Stage 2 are reasonable, especially since Stage 1 will reach the delisting goal.**

Slide 15: The **proposed 90% wide buffers and 10% narrow buffers are reasonable, with 15 years for Stage 1 and 5 years for Stage 2.** It was suggested again to **include the Continuing Conservation Initiative (CCI) practices** in the plan. HRSWCD said in the past, these practices have been considered a low priority and many people haven't wanted to continue practices (to get out of lifespan and oversight of BMPs) so not much has been funded by VACS. The 319(h) funding could help with this (and would be considered 'maintenance' rather than contributing to reductions). The SWCDs also said that **WP-2 (N or W) are rarely implemented**.

Slide 16: It was pointed out that SL-8 (cover crops) are annual practices so 319(h) could not fund these practices (since it doesn't fund annual practices). The SWCDs said **WP-1 doesn't happen in this watershed so consider removing** and to **increase the number of acres for SL-8B.** The SWCDs suggested adding the following BMPs:

- **SL-1** (Long term Vegetative Cover on Cropland)- said this is more advantageous than SL-8.
- **FR-3** (Woodland Buffer Filter Area)- this may not do much for reducing bacteria (more for sediment TMDLs) and this is very similar to SL-11.

Slide 17: The SWCDs said **SL-6W unit cost should be increased to $100,000; SL-7 unit should be changed to 'system' and $20,000/system; and WP-4 should be increased to $300,000.**

Slide 18: These priority areas may change once ESWCD sends the updated BMPs installed in the SF Holston- Dickey Creek HUC (TH01).

Slide 19: The amount of technical assistance that's currently provided in a 319(h) grant is only 35% of the total grant so there's no way that a full-time employee could be included in the grant proposal. In the past, there were SWCD employees that were full-time on 319(h) grants but that's no longer the case. When did this change and why? Implementing a 319(h) grant is more work on the SWCD staff since they're also doing their work on VACS and other funded projects. In an ideal world, **1.5 FTE per SWCD would be needed to implement this plan.**

Slide 20: These overall totals will change once the updates we discussed today are done.

Next steps:

The final public meeting will be in late May/early June 2023. Stephanie Kreps (DEQ) will be in touch with more details as this meeting date is determined. A final draft of the IP will be presented (including the changes discussed during today's meeting) and will initiate a 30-day public comment period. After the 30-day public comment period, it will be submitted to EPA for approval. It is anticipated that the plan will be approved by June/July 2023. Once the plan is approved, the SF Holston River IP will be eligible for DEQ Nonpoint Source 319(h) funds. The next opportunity to apply for these funds will be summer 2023 (with activities starting in fall 2024) so it's possible that applications could be submitted this year. If EPA is unable to approve the IP by 12/1/2023, the next opportunity to apply for funds will be the summer of 2024 (with activities starting in fall 2025).